

Rerun Our Cold War Cultural Diplomacy

By ALAN RIDING

PARIS, Oct. 26 — Who can doubt the appeal of American popular culture? If it dominates much of the world, it is because much of the world consumes it with relish. Indeed, while rejecting United States foreign policy, people in many countries happily embrace America's movies, television programs and pop music. Even Iranians lap up "Bay-watch" via satellite.

This also represents good business, something that the Bush administration is eager to defend. At the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization last week, Washington was almost alone in opposing a new convention on cultural diversity designed to promote alternatives to American-style cultural globalization.

The convention, of course, was adopted anyway, but it poses no real threat to Hollywood. For just about everyone outside, say, Himalayan villages and Amazonian settlements, popular culture will continue to define what's right and what's wrong with American society.

Yet almost out of earshot, questions are being asked about whether it is wise for the United States's cultural image to be shaped exclusively by the marketplace. More specifically, with Washington now dusting off public diplomacy as a strategy to combat rampant anti-Americanism, is it time to revive cultural diplomacy?

The purpose would not be to mute American popular culture. Instead, rather than trying to compete for the attention of the masses, cultural diplomacy would aim to persuade political and intellectual elites of the virtues of American civilization.

This approach is now being quietly promoted by several arts lobbies in the United States. In a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in July, a group called Americans for International Arts and Cultural Exchange wrote: "Our coalition believes America has many cultural capabilities and talents that remain underutilized in the international arena and which can be effective in reaching out and telling our story to the world."

The administration official charged with repairing America's image is Karen P. Hughes, the newly named undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs. In an address to her staff last month, she acknowledged that popular culture can be a two-edged sword. "Our music and film industries, our artists and entertainers create very powerful impressions, sometimes good, sometimes bad, but they're always, always powerful," Ms. Hughes said.

At the same time, the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs is giving some of its cultural programming a sharper political focus. For instance, working with Jazz at Lincoln Center, it has arranged for musicians affected by Hurricane Katrina, including the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, to visit countries that provided help to disaster victims. Such cultural diplomacy,

though, still lacks the financing and political backing needed to be more than symbolic.

It is hardly a radical idea. France, Britain, Germany, Japan and many other American allies have long used culture — libraries, art galleries, orchestras, theater groups, lecture tours and the like — to show their best face to the world. For this very purpose, for instance, France is currently sponsoring a theater festival called Act French in New York.

It is also easily forgotten that the United States pioneered cultural diplomacy to combat Nazi propaganda before World War II. Later, on a larger scale, it used artistic and intellectual freedom as a weapon against Communism, both inside the Soviet bloc through radio broadcasts and cultural exchanges and across Western Europe through, say, sponsorship of literary magazines.

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What distinguished this cultural diplomacy from traditional cultural exports was that it engaged principally in the battle of ideas. Intellectuals from the former Soviet bloc have often underlined the importance of these programs.

But with the collapse of Soviet Communism, the battle of ideas was declared won. And soon budgetary support for cultural diplomacy evaporated. By the late 1990's, when the United States Information Agency was folded into the State Department, Congress forced the cancellation of most cultural exchanges and the closing of American libraries and cultural centers worldwide.

Then came 9/11 and the Iraq war and the abrupt realization that the United States needed soft power as well as military might. Washington's first response was to adapt the cold war model of the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe: it created Radio Sawa and al-Hurra satellite television for Arab audiences and Radio Farda for Farsi speakers in

Iran and Afghanistan.

Ms. Hughes also sees a role for propaganda — she did not, of course, use the word — on the frontline of global politics. "We can't expect people to give a fair hearing to our ideas if we don't advocate them very aggressively," she noted last month. On recent "listening tours" of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Indonesia, though, she had a chance to measure the cultural gap separating the United States and the Muslim world.

Clearly, just as Islamic fundamentalism poses a threat different from Communist totalitarianism, the cold war model of cultural diplomacy — designed essentially for Europe — needs revising if it is to win over key opinionmakers in the Middle East and Muslim Asia.

"The new situation is much more multipolar," said Frank Hodson, who led the National Endowment for the Arts under the Reagan administration and is now chairman of the Center for Arts and Culture in Washington. "There's a need for more effort in a lot more places where cultures are much more different."

In a joint study last year, Mr. Hodson's center and the Coalition for American Leadership Abroad offered suggestions: increasing cultural exchanges, facilitating visits to the United States by foreign artists and scholars, sponsoring trips abroad by American artists, reopening libraries and cultural centers and expanding English-language programs and cultural workshops.

It also proposed adding \$10 million to cultural financing by the State Department (which stands, this year, at a modest \$4.05 million) and called for greater involvement by the private sector. "Corporations could be doing much more," said Stefan Toepler, director of the Center for Arts and Culture. "They have a big stake in this. They have markets to protect."

Still, more than money will be necessary for cultural diplomacy to be effective; entrenched anti-Americanism will take years of persuasion — and, in some cases, policy changes by Washington — to be reversed. And here experts add a caveat: for cultural diplomacy to be effective, it must emphasize broader American values over the specific interests of any administration. In the cold war, at least, patience was rewarded.